



Update

APRIL 2011

A legislator's guide to oral health care issues, provided by the members of the Pennsylvania Dental Association

Dentists
Providing
Access to
Dental Care
in
Pennsylvania

URGENT REQUEST FROM PDA: RESTORE FUNDING IN THE DONATED DENTAL SERVICES PROGRAM

In 2009, funding for Pennsylvania's Donated Dental Services program was cut in response to the state's burgeoning fiscal crisis. This amazing program, which successfully partnered the private and public sectors, connected some of Pennsylvania's most vulnerable citizens with dentists willing to donate their time and money to provide them with oral health care. Now, these patients and others are in danger of falling through the cracks of the state's dental delivery system.

According to Dental Lifeline Network, which runs DDS programs across the nation, "Many Pennsylvanians who are disabled, elderly or medically at risk suffer with seriously-neglected dental problems because they cannot afford treatment. As a result of their disabilities or ages, many cannot work and must depend on government programs to pay for their health care. Medicare, however, does not offer dental benefits and Pennsylvania's Medicaid program limits eligibility and the procedures it provides. As a result, many disabled or aged people cannot access the dental treatment they desperately need."

Recognizing the growing need to find care for these individuals, in 1996 the Richard K. Mellon Foundation, Dental Lifeline Network and PDA launched a pilot program in western Pennsylvania. In 2001, the Pennsylvania Department of Health allocated funding to expand the program to the rest of the state. Patients from virtually every county in the state were able to access dentists through this program.

The funding stream continued until October 2009. One might think the funding was exorbitant but the price tag is astonishingly small, given the program's benefits to patients and the money saved by taxpayers when

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the care provided prevents the need for more costly care in the future. For \$150,000 a year, the program was able to maintain offices in western and eastern Pennsylvania and hire coordinators to facilitate between patients and dentists. Since funding was cut, one office has closed and patients in surrounding areas have been left to fend for themselves trying to find dentists willing to donate care. More than 570 individuals are on a waiting list. Some of these patients face life-threatening illnesses if their dental needs are unmet; many will end up in the emergency room when they could have been treated at a lower cost by volunteer dentists.

The success of this program cannot be disputed. **Since 1996, dentists participating in the DDS program have provided \$8,598,852 worth of care to more than 4,000 vulnerable patients. More than 700 dentists and 300 dental laboratories provide this care.** Pennsylvania is one of 39 states that collectively generated \$22.7 million in donated care for over 7,300 patients in 2010 alone. For every dollar spent, volunteers donated \$10.49 in care, a significant amount for small business owners who have high overhead, expensive equipment and staff to pay.

Dental Lifeline Network faces the very real possibility of having to cut the program entirely. Already the goals for 2011 have been markedly reduced: to help 400 aged, disabled or medically at-risk patients access care, and to maintain a minimum number of volunteer dentists and dental laboratories willing to generate \$1 million in donated care or laboratory fabrications. **And already, they face the likelihood of having to close the other office and lay off the individual coordinating treatment.**

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The answer is simple: restore funding in the DDS program. Coupled with funding from the Richard K. Mellon Foundation and the National Foundation of Dentistry for the Handicapped, this program can once again flourish in Pennsylvania. Treating hundreds of patients through the DDS program will help alleviate the strain on the state's Medical Assistance program. It will provide essential services to individuals and prevent the need for more costly treatment when dental needs are unmet. It will help those who suffer physically and emotionally with problems that may affect their ability to eat, or even to smile. For a relatively small investment, our citizens at risk are treated humanely and taxpayers save overall on dental health expenditures.

Pennsylvania has adequate capacity and a diverse dental team structure to meet the needs of all citizens. But we need to eliminate barriers by restoring funding in this important public and private sector initiative. Pennsylvania should not squander the benevolence of hundreds of dentists and dental laboratories who donate their time, talent and money to treating these patients. Please restore funding in this essential program and bring hope to thousands desperately in need.

Who We Are

The Pennsylvania Dental Association (PDA), comprised of more than 5,500 actively practicing and retired dentists, is proud of its efforts to improve Pennsylvanians' oral health.

PDA's goals are to promote optimal dental care for the public, improve the availability of dental care for all citizens, speak on behalf of the public's dental health interests before government entities and educate the public about preventing oral disease and promoting good oral health.

This edition of the Oral Health Update is a plea to legislators and the Governor's Administration to restore funding in the Donated Dental Services (DDS) program. This vital program recruits dentists who donate time and money to treat our most vulnerable patients: the disabled, elderly and those who have serious medical conditions for whom an oral health problem may be life threatening. Restoration of this funding will ensure that DDS coordinators are able to facilitate between patients and providers so that the former is able to access the care they need. For a mere \$150,000 in state funding, hundreds of patients are treated and taxpayers save on more costly expenditures to treat problems that have been exacerbated over time.

WHY DO WE NEED THE DDS PROGRAM IN PENNSYLVANIA?

- Pennsylvania has the third largest elderly population in the United States. As baby boomers retire, unmet dental needs and expenditures will rise exponentially.
- The families of thousands of patients challenged with mental or physical disabilities are usually in most need of donated services.
- Patients with serious illnesses cannot afford to ignore their dental problems. Left untreated, dental problems can result in compromised quality of life and even death.
- Having a DDS program helps reduce the financial strain on Pennsylvania's Medical Assistance and CHIP programs.
- Taxpayers ultimately bear the cost of treating more serious dental problems that would have been eliminated with prevention or early intervention.



Dental Lifeline Network is a national humanitarian dental organization providing access to comprehensive dentistry for society's most vulnerable individuals who are disabled, elderly or medically at-risk and have no other way to get help.

Contact Us

PDA prides itself on being Pennsylvania's premier dental organization and the leading authority on all dental issues. Please contact PDA's government relations staff at mss@padental.org, or (717) 234-5941, for more information about our advocacy goals. You can also contact PDA's government relations consultants, Mark Singel and Peg Moyer of The Winter Group, at (717) 909-9561. Visit www.padental.org to find out more about us and the services our members provide to your constituents!